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ABSTRACT

Handicapped children of cultural and linguistic groups different from those of the majority culture are presently unable to attain an appropriate education. Bilingual/multicultural exceptional children are overrepresented in special education classes in comparison to their percentage of the total population, as a result of biased assessment practices. Adequate assessment instruments have not been developed which can fairly assess children of different linguistic or cultural groups. Insufficient numbers of professional personnel are adequately equipped to develop, administer, or interpret assessment instruments or procedures. Programs either do not exist or are inadequate for children who are legitimately identified as requiring special education services. Minority children must deal with discrimination based upon racial or ethnic identity as well as the negative impact of special education labels. Because teacher attitudes and expectations are important to the success of minority children receiving special education services, utilization of minority professionals who are familiar with the field of special education would be advantageous. Most curriculum material is culturally and historically irrelevant to minority children. There is a need for comprehensive, evaluated programs which take into account diverse learning styles and cognitive development of bilingual/multicultural children. (CM)

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ISSUES IN BILINGUAL/MULTICULTURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Minority group children are over represented in special education classes in comparison to their percentage of the total population. It is apparent that for this group, the goal of receiving an equal and appropriate education is unattainable. The major reasons that these children will be unable to attain an equal and appropriate education is that programs for many bilingual/multicultural exceptional children are inadequate and underdeveloped. Furthermore, there does not exist trained personnel capable of dealing with the diverse educational needs of this group.

Introduction

Recent federal legislation (PL 94-142) has resulted in the incorporation of significant sectors of previously unserved handicapped children into the public educational system. Because of this legislation, there now exist formalized guarantees regarding the rights of all handicapped children to a "free and appropriate" public education (PL 94-142).

It is apparent, however, that for a certain number of handicapped children, the goal of providing a free and appropriate public education is unattainable at present. This group of handicapped children includes those of cultural and linguistic groups different from those of the majority culture. The major reason that these children will be unable to attain an appropriate education is that there do not exist, at present, appropriate educational programs nor trained personnel capable of dealing with the diverse educational needs of this group (Gonzales, 1979; Bernal, 1976).

The scope of the problem is widened when it is taken into account that bilingual/multicultural children are overrepresented in special education, in comparison to their percentage of the total population (Mercer, 1973). Furthermore, programs for bilingual/multicultural exceptional children are either inappropriate, inadequate, unsystematic, or undeveloped (Gallagher and Kinney, 1974).

There are several factors which are indicative of the poor progress bilingual/multicultural children have made in special education as presently structured. In addition, these factors demonstrate the need for developing appropriate programs for bilingual/multicultural children in special education, as well as the need for training personnel to deal with the special needs of these children. These factors include (a) overrepresentation; (b) biased

assessment practices; (c) impact of negative labels; (d) teacher attitudes and expectations; (e) lack of minority personnel in special education; (f) irrelevant or inappropriate instructional programs; and (g) inadequate instructional programs.

Overrepresentation of Minority Children in Special Education

There has been much concern on the part of parents and some special education personnel regarding the numbers of minority children in special education. Existing data appear to indicate that minority children are placed in special education out of proportion to their numbers in general population. The area where the data has proved most striking has been in classes for the mildly mentally retarded.

For example, Mercer (1973) has reported that black children were seven times as likely and Mexican American children ten times as likely as Anglo children to be placed in special classes. Although Mercer's data reflected conditions in only one school district, more extensive data has been provided by the California State Department of Education for the whole state. Blacks were found to comprise 8.9 percent of the total public school population but 25% of the enrollment in special classes for the educable mentally retarded (EMR). Spanish surname students, who represented 15.2 percent of the public school population, constituted 23.0 percent of those in special classes for EMRs. Anglo students, in contrast, comprised 72.4 percent of the total public school population, but only 50 percent of those in EMR classes.

Although these figures are based on observations in California, it is reasonable to expect that similar conditions occur whenever significant minority populations exist, such as in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas. In these southwestern states, nearly one of every five children in public school is of minority ethnic background (Committee on Civil

Rights, 1974).

Biased Assessment Practices

Several authors have voiced concern about the consequences of biased assessment practices on minority children (Samuda, 1976; Bernal and Reyna, 1975; Mercer, 1973; Laosa, 1973). At least one consequence of biased assessment practices is overrepresentation of minority children in special education. Part of the problem is that adequate assessment instruments have not been developed which can fairly assess children of different linguistic or cultural groups. A more serious problem, however, is that there do not exist sufficient numbers of professional personnel adequately equipped to develop, administer, or interpret assessment instruments or procedures. Additionally, even for those children who are legitimately identified as requiring special education services, programs either do not exist or are inadequate.

The Impact of Negative Labels

The impact of negative labels has long been a problem of concern to special educators (Hobbs, 1975; MacMillan, Jones and Aloia, 1974; Dunn 1968). Although there is no conclusive data regarding long term effects of labeling, there is evidence regarding the stigma and embarrassment felt be children placed in special education (Jones, 1974).

Minority children with special education labels can be seen as a high risk group in terms of the negative impact of labels. Not only are they subject to discrimination based upon racial or ethnic identity, but in addition, they must deal with possible negative effects of special educational labels. Dealing with complex problems such as this, related to the education of minority children in special education, almost certainly will require specially trained personnel and programs systematically

designed to be able to respond to the needs of this group.

Teacher Attitudes and Expectations

There is controversy in the literature regarding the precise effects of teacher expectations on the performance of minority group children. Data does exist, however, to support the view that teachers hold negative attitudes toward minority group children (Convin and Schmidt, 1970; Herriot and St. John, 1966).

In addition to this evidence, Brophy and Good (1974) have researched the process and effects of teacher attitudes and expectations on children's performance. Several of the characteristics upon which teachers base negative expectations in students are characteristics of minority children in special education. These characteristics include low intelligence, low academic achievement, low SES, use of non-standard English, and even writing neatness. A study done by Zucker and Prieto (1977) demonstrated that special education teachers considered special class placement more appropriate for Mexican-American children than for Anglo children. The expectations held by teachers were apparantly so strong that the expectations took precedence over the fact that identical information was contained in the hypothetical case study summaries of all students.

Teacher attitudes and expectations are important to the success of minority children receiving special education services. Negative teacher attitudes and expectations are likely an important factor in the over-representation of minority children in special education alluded to earlier. It appears that this would be a crucial factor especially in the earlier stages of the labeling process, such as at the referral stage (Mercer, 1973). In addition, expectations and attitudes would be a critical factor for those teachers working with bilingual/multicultural children already placed in special education. Specialized programs and specialized

training of teachers would appear to be an obvious means of at least partially overcoming these difficulties.

Lack of Appropriately Prepared Personnel and Systematically Evaluated Programs

One of the foreseeable problems in providing services to previously unserved or inappropriately served minority children, as mandated by recent federal legislation (P.L. 94-142), is the lack of trained personnel and systematically evaluated programs. Appropriate assessment methods, curriculum development, consulation, and program and material evaluation are only a few of the areas where specially prepared professionals and programs will be needed if the intent of P.L. 94-142 is to be realized.

A partial solution would be to utilize minority professionals with some familiarity of the field of special education. Such personnel would be at least able to begin to develop appropriate programs to meet the educational needs of the students in question. However, at present, there exist few minority professionals in special education and related fields, especially at the Master's or post-Master's level of training (Gonzales, 1979).

Another problem with this solution, however, is that few of the non-minority personnel presently working with bilingual/multicultural children have ever had formal training in systematically evaluated, appropriate techniques useful in working with this group of children. At present, there exist few, if any, formal programs of training or systematically organized and evaluated methods for those wishing to work in special education settings with bilingual/multicultural children. Therefore, the need exists not only for training for those wishing to work with minority children in special education, but in developing organized, appropriate methods to be used.

Irrelevant, or Inappropriate Instructional Programs and Materials

There has been some concern on the part of various educators about the reasons for poor academic performance on the part of minority school children. At least one reason that has been proposed is that curriculum, as found in most formal educational institutions, is culturally and historically irrelevant to minority children. That is, the curriculum fails to take into account the historical and cultural values and perceptions of various racial and ethnic groups (Grant, 1978; Castaneda, 1976; Jones, 1976). It is for this reason that situations occur in classrooms in which a child from a bilingual/multicultural background responds to a task in a manner that may appear random or retarded (Sierra, 1973; Bransford, Baca and Lane, 1973).

As a means of remediating this type of problem, several authors have called for educational programs which are culturally democratic (Castaneda, 1976), multicultural (Bransford, et al., 1973), or culturally pluralistic (Mercer, 1973). However, there are few if any systematic programs of this type available to exceptional children of bilingual/multicultural backgrounds at the present time.

Inadequate Instructional Programs

There have been suggestions in the published literature that education, as presently structured, does not take into account diverse learning styles and cognitive development in bilingual/multicultural children (Ramirez and Castaneda, 1974; Sierra, 1973). In support of this, previous research shows that children from various cultural linguistic groups differ with respect to such important educational variables as preferred learning styles, relational and other personality configurations, perceptual-cognitive patterns, family structure, attitude toward the educational process, sex

role development, linguistic development and maternal teaching strategies (Kagan and Madsen, 1971; Castaneda, Ramirez, and Herold, 1974; Labelle, 1976; Stodolsky and Lesser, 1970; Laosa, 1977, 1978; Feschbach, 1973). At present, comprehensive, evaluated programs taking these factors into account have not been developed for bilingual/multicultural exceptional children.

Although the above mentioned factors have continued to exist, the resulting exclusionary and/or inappropriately designed educational practices and programs are now considered illegal (P.L. 94-142). Therefore, there exists at present, a critical need for appropriate, well-designed educational programs for bilingual/multicultural exceptional children.

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